

Immigration in Assam during Colonial rule: Its Impact on the Socio-Economic and Demography of Assam

Bishwajit Sonowal

Abstract: The problem of immigration is becoming serious day by day in Assam. It has deep impact on the socio-economic and political life of Assam. However, immigration is not a recent phenomenon in the context of Assam. It was the British government who, for the first time initiated the trend of immigration as a state policy into Assam. At the very outset, immigration was primarily concerned to economic activities, but later it was more political rather economic. Besides, immigration in the beginning was very small. It was not viewed as a threat to the Assam's society. But in the subsequent days, the pace of immigration reached into such a stage which posed great challenges to society of Assam. Therefore, in this writing an attempt is being made to understand the histogenesis and the impact of immigration on the society of Assam.

Keywords: Migration , Immigration, immigrants, professionals, influx, production, peasants, lands, community, tea gardens, laborers, population, patronage, industrialization, encroachment,

The terms *Migration* and *Immigration* are synonymous. Both of them are related to the movement of people between countries or states. *Migration* is a general term describing the movement of people from one area to another. As Matt described, *Immigration* is a sub-category of that which usually refers to people moving *into* a country.¹

Human migration is a worldwide phenomenon. Its nature, types and causes vary through time and over space. It may temporary or permanent. There are primarily two types of human migration viz. *Intra State Migration* (migration within the political boundary) and *Inter State Migration* (migration from one state to another). Migration or immigration is caused by variety of factors such as economic, social and political factor. They are classified as employment, marriage, education, lack of security etc.

Assam has witnessed a long history of immigration since the beginning of the 19th century. Initially, this trend of immigration did not create any disturbance in the socio-economic and political environment of Assam. However, in the subsequent days the pace of immigration increased in such a scale which not only increased population density in Assam but also posed some serious challenges to its society and economy. It becomes a major issue for the Assamese intellectuals to be dealt with and find ways to put an end in it. Even, at the present time also,

among all the burning problems of Assam, immigration is a major problem which is considered as a significant factor for political instability in the state.

Objective

Through this writing an attempt is being made to explore the histogenesis of the process of immigration into Assam and to examine its impact on the demographic, economic and socio culture characteristics and also on the political life of the people during the colonial period.

Methodology

The paper is analytical and descriptive in nature based on secondary sources. It includes books, magazines, internet websites and so on.

Immigration in Assam

Historical evidences indicate that a stream of feeble immigration into Assam occurred in the later part of Ahom rule. However, the continuous process of immigration into erstwhile Assam started since the province of Assam was annexed by the British in 1826. The process of immigration which started initially in a small way just after annexation, attain vigorous momentum as soon as the British consolidated power in the entire region. In Assam over four fifth of the cultivable waste lands remained untouched by plough at the close of the last century. The local authorities encouraged immigrants into both the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys. They invited people from outside Assam and offered rent-free waste lands for a turn of years.²

Immediately after annexation of Assam, the British started tea cultivation as early as 1835 near Sadiya. When the tea cultivation proved successful, several England based companies took up large scale tea plantation in upper Assam after 1835. As labor force was not available locally and the local people of Assam were unwilling to work in the tea gardens, the planters started importing indentured laborers from densely populated areas of Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Central Province, United Province and Madras.³ In 1867-68 the total population of the labor force in the gardens of Assam proper was 34,433 of which, 22,800 or two thirds were imported labor.⁴ During eighties, as many as 76,041 workers were brought to the Sibsagar district alone.⁵

To conduct the administration of Assam a large number of educated Bengali people were also imported to Assam by the Britishers.

The discovery of coal and petroleum in upper Assam in the later part of the 19th century brought a new economic order and a commercial opportunity to Assam. The colonial administration needed a skilled educated labor force to maintain various departments and to construct road and railways. They found the local source unable to provide such labor force and inducted professionals for making industry, tradesmen, police and security personals from

outside the province. Thus a new trend of induced immigration set in with the coming of various categories of people mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and from Nepal.

Contemporary to these immigrations, a stream of large-scale influx of immigrants into Assam started from erstwhile East-Bengal (now Bangladesh). While Assam was put under the Bengal Presidency and was brought under a chief commissioner in 1874, the most populous Sylhet district of East Bengal was tagged with Assam. At that time, geographically Assam was a vast state with sparse population. Sir Henry Cotton, the chief commissioner of Assam felt that the large tracts of virgin and fertile arable land lying unused, be cultivated to set up food grain production. Since the turn of the century the process of immigration of land hungry peasants into the Brahmaputra Valley from Sylhet, Mymensingh and Rangpur districts of East Bengal got accelerated. Initially, the immigration of peasants from those areas was encouraged by the Zamindars (landlords) of lower Assam with the connivance of the British rulers. It virtually opened the floodgates of Muslim immigration into Assam primarily for using the vacant and unexplored lands in the state.

During this period many people from Rajasthan also came to this land. The migrants from Rajasthan viz. the Marwaris acted as money changers, bankers and agents of tea garden managers. Though a small community, the Punjabis was the principal contractors, carpenters and skilled mechanics in railways and tea gardens in Upper Assam. In addition, the Kabulis of Afghanistan the great peddlers of the province came up every year with loads of piece goods and dried fruit which they hawk about through the village and tea gardens.⁶

Besides these immigrants, there was another contemporary stream of migration into erstwhile Assam from Nepal during 1911-31. The majority of the Nepali immigrants were graziers, ex-servicemen, porters and agricultural laborers. The Chinese immigrants were also invited by the tea-planters to work in the tea cultivation.

Impact of Immigration

Social Impact

As the immigrants in Assam are heterogeneous and diverse in caste, religion, language and culture, they may be profound socio-cultural implications. The different migrant groups had brought significant change in the socio-cultural profile of the state.

During colonial rule, the Britishers imported the tea garden laborers from outside Assam. They were hired as laborers to work in the tea plantation and tea industries. These laborers were expert and physically efficient for this particular work and with them tea industry became prosperous. Initially, these people were forced to confine themselves within the boundary of the tea estates, but gradually they assimilated with the Assamese culture as well as essentially became a part of Assamese culture. The import of laborers for tea gardens in Assam which

continued till 1931 was practically stoooped in 1941. As these people did not go back to their original localities, they settled down in the tea garden and their adjoining vacant lands mainly in old Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Darrang and Cachar district. They formed a separate class of population giving a new dimension to the broad population of the state.⁷

The British government appointed educated Bengali people to conduct the administration. Apparently it ceased the employment opportunity of the Assamese people. Maniram Dewan protested against the appointment of several Bengalis from Sylhet and Marwaris as mauzadars when a number of respectable Assamese were already out of employ.⁸ As a result of Bengali immigration, in 1836 Bengali was made the official language and medium of instruction in schools of Assam by the Government of Fort William.

In the 3rd and 4th decade of 20th century one of the main dimensions of the immigration problem was the burning language issue. The expatriate Bengali Hindus, who were dominate in the towns and many of the Muslim immigrants demanded equal rights for the Bengali language. However, the Muslim immigrants were more concerned with acquiring land rights than preserving their language.⁹

The impact of Bengal on the life and culture of the Assamese was also not small. Assamese gentry were addressed as Babus and the latter evinced for increasing fascination for the Punjabi shawl and Santipuri dhoti of Bengali. The worship of the deities like Durga, Kali, Chandi and Annapurna became common not only in public but also in private residences.

The inflow of the Muslim immigrants received and increased vigorously under political patronage of the Assam government which was dominated by the Muslim League. The leaders gave all encouragement to these new settlers from East Bengal. By late 1930s the "All India Muslim League" turned its expansionist design to a confrontationist Muslim politics in Assam. It encouraged the Muslim migrants to settle in Assam and since then the immigrants have become chronic problem in the provincial politics of the state. During the period between 1939-1941 Saddullah Government allotted 1 lakh bighas of land of Assam valley for the settlement of East Bengal immigrants. The census report of 1911 for the first time recorded the immigration of farm laborers from Mymensing, Sylhet and Rangpur district to Assam who occupied mainly the clear lands of Goalpara district. As a result, the population of Goalpara district jumped up by 30 percent in 1901-11 as against only 2 percent in the previous decade. Since then this immigration continued unabated and the immigrants began to spread over the other districts of lower and central Assam viz. Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon districts. In 1921 one/fifth of Goalpara district population and one/seventh of Nagaon district's population were recorded as Bengal born and a large majority of them were from the district of Mymensing.¹⁰

Most of Nepali immigrants depended on livestock farming. Many of them also took up agriculture together with cattle rearing as their main occupation. They settled down in all

districts of Assam with high concentration in Darrang, Lakhimpur and Khasi hill districts. The Marwaris who came to Assam have settled in large number throughout the state. Today this community controls almost the whole of the main business and the wholesale trade of Assam.

Economic Impact

The impact of immigration on the economy of Assam was remarkable. The migrated expert laborers played an important role in the economic development of Assam. Their role in industrialization and development of agriculture was conducive to overall economic growth of colonial Assam. The hard working Muslim immigrants, after setting down mainly in the flood plains of the Brahmaputra Valley and cultivable waste lands brought a tremendous change to the agricultural economy of the state by introducing cultivation of jute, vegetables and Ahu rice on a commercial scale. Thus the main trend of agriculture went to their hands. As we know that many professional workers were also came such as omlahs, traders, boatmen, khalasis of mail, masons, earth cutters, carters, cobblers, fishermen etc. from other parts of the country. As time passes, these people began to start their own profession in Assam. The Marwaris almost captured the whole trade and commerce of the province. Thus the immigrants captured almost the entire economic sector of the state.

As they became permanent settlers in Assam, with the passage of time, many of the Muslim immigrants have accepted Assamese as mother tongue. However, at one time these immigrants had proved to be of great concern to the indigenous people in certain areas. The inevitable consequence of occupation of *char lands*, grazing lands and wastelands in the areas settled by local people was frequent friction between the immigrants and the local people. The Assam government could foresee the problem and introduced a “line system” as early as 1920 to impose restriction on settlement of immigrants in certain areas predominantly inhabited by backward plain tribes. The main objective of the line system was to isolate the immigrants from the areas settled by local people and gave land for settlement to the immigrants in segregated areas beyond which they were not allowed to settle. But, because of lukewarm response of the Assam cabinet headed by Sir Saddullah towards the Line System encroachment in reserved forest areas and waste land in the tribal belt by the immigrants went unabated. Even during those days the people of Assam were very much apprehensive of a clandestine move in favor of the immigrant Muslims for strengthening their hold further in the state.

Conclusion

Immigration into Assam vis-à-vis North East India has received attention of scholars from various disciplines in the recent years, because unlike most parts of the country, the

problem of immigration into the region is markedly different. Although, all the North Eastern states do reflected the influence of immigrations, the magnitude of the problem is negligible in other states as compared to Assam. The process of immigration into undivided Assam which started during the British period has attained such a magnitude during post Independence period that it has surpassed many of known instances of inter regional migration of population in the contemporary period. Massive and unchecked influx of population into Assam from Bangladesh, Nepal and other states of India in recent times has not only adversely influenced the demographic, economic and socio-cultural profiles but also became one of the main reasons of social tension and ethnic unrest. As we know that in the early stage, the pre-Independence immigration was seen useful and non-threatening and they were accepted as the population pressure on the state's land resources. Assamese people who were related with the tea industry such as Jagannath Baruah and others welcomed these immigrants. Later, some sense of consciousness grew among the educated Assamese people. But, Ambikagiri Raychoudhury's call for the organization of a tow lakh strong Assamese volunteer corps styled 'Assam Atmarakshini Vahini' to resist further immigration and the alleged Muslim League invasion of Assam went unheeded, although he was acclaimed as a true son of the people. His party, the Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha- renamed Assam Jatiya Mahasabha in 1935- flourished as platform for articulation of widely shared 'Sons of the Soil' sentiment. In the contemporary Assamese newspapers 'gunda', 'dokait' etc words were used for the immigrants. From the economic point of view, the immigration created challenges for the natives. On the other hand politically and from the nationalist point of view it is an important issue. By the late 1930s the All India Muslim League started Muslim politics in Assam. It encouraged the Muslim migrants to settle in Assam. Moulana Abdul Bhasani, the provincial league president tried to organize the immigrants and gave the whole issue a political color. He also opposed the Line System and tried to organize a civil disobedience movement against it. Even now a days, the most pervasive impact of large scale immigration into Assam in the dominant roles played by the immigrant groups in the state's political milieu. The sensitive issue of immigration into Assam and for that matter North East India as a whole has been accepted as a national problem. The government of India must have a determined political will to find out a permanent solution of the problem without further delay. All the sections of people irrespective of caste, creed, religion and political affiliation should face it unitedly in the interest of peace, harmony and speedy economic development of the state.

End notes

1. Barpujari H.K (1993) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol.V", First Edition, Published by K. Goswami, secretary, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, p.48
2. Baruah S.L (2003) *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Published by Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi, p 621,

3. Bhagawati Aboni K, Bora Ashok K, Kar Bimal K, (2001) *Geography of Assam*, Second edition, Published by Rajesh Publication, Assam, p.96
4. Guha Amalendu (2006) *Planter Raj to Swarj*, Revised edition, Published by Tulika Books, Shahpur Jat, New Delhi, p.16
5. Bhagawati Aboni K, Bora Ashok K, Kar Bimal K, (2001) *Geography of Assam*, Second edition, Published by Rajesh Publication, Assam, p.96